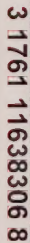


**Governance**  
 Institution

A Way with words; guidelines and appropriate terminology for the portrayal of persons with disabilities








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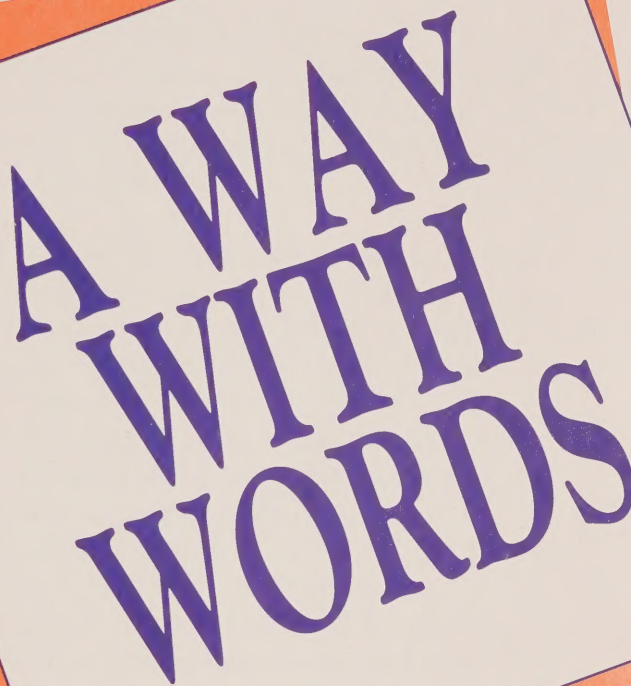
# A WAY WITH WORDS

GUIDELINES AND APPROPRIATE TERMINOLOGY  
FOR THE PORTRAYAL OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



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# A WAY WITH WORDS

GUIDELINES AND APPROPRIATE TERMINOLOGY  
FOR THE PORTRAYAL OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

A  
WAY  
WITH  
WORDS

Guidelines and appropriate  
terminology for the portrayal  
of persons with disabilities

Produced by  
Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat  
Department of the Secretary of State  
of Canada  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0M5  
(819) 997-2412 (VOICE and TDD)

This booklet is available in alternate media format.  
Ce guide est également disponible en français.



# INTRODUCTION:

**L**anguage is a powerful and important tool in shaping ideas, perceptions, and ultimately, public attitudes.

**W**ords are a mirror of society's attitudes and perceptions. Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier persons with disabilities must face in gaining full integration, acceptance and participation in society.

**C**areful presentation of information about persons with disabilities can help overcome negative attitudes and shape positive ones. The Standing Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons found in its report *No News is Bad News* that vocabulary can create perception. Demeaning, belittling or negative words are a barrier to greater understanding and can trivialize genuine support given by a community to persons with disabilities.

**L**anguage use is changing as persons with disabilities claim their individual and collective right to participate fully in society.

**D**ated and disparaging words are being replaced with precise, descriptive terms which have specific meanings that are not interchangeable.

**P**ersons with disabilities are asking, just as women and minority groups are asking, that the media use respectful terms in writing about them or issues that affect their lives.

**I**ndividuals with disabilities are working to achieve equality, independence and full participation in our society. The ways in which issues are reported and the use of proper terminology can help persons with disabilities reach these goals.

## **PURPOSE:**

**T**his booklet suggests current and appropriate terminology to reflect the increased participation by Canadians with disabilities in our society. This booklet is intended to encourage and promote fair and accurate portrayal of persons with disabilities. It is primarily designed for print and broadcast media professionals writing and reporting about issues of concern to persons with disabilities.

## **CONTENT:**

**T**his booklet has two sections and a removable insert. **GENERAL GUIDELINES** has information on terminology and portrayal of persons with disabilities.



**MEDIA COVERAGE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES** deals with reporting on issues of concern to persons with disabilities. The removable insert suggests appropriate terminology.

## **GENERAL GUIDELINES:**

- 1** It is important to remember that each word in today's terminology has a precise meaning and that the words are not interchangeable.
- 2** "Disabled" and "handicapped" are not the same thing. A disability is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity. A "handicap" is an environmental or attitudinal barrier that limits the opportunity for a person to participate fully. Negative attitudes or inaccessible entrances to buildings are examples of handicaps.
- 3** The word "disabled" is an adjective, not a noun. People are not conditions. Do not use "the disabled"; use "persons with disabilities".
- 4** Focus on the issue rather than the disability. If the disability is not relevant to the story, it is not necessary to report it.

- 5** Try to avoid categorizing persons with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures. Choose words that are non-judgemental, non-emotional and are accurate descriptions. Avoid using "brave", "courageous", "inspirational" or other similar words that are routinely used to describe a person with a disability.

Remember that the majority of persons with disabilities are average and typical of the rest of the population.

Similarly, references which cause discomfort, guilt, pity or insult, should be avoided. Words like "suffers from", "stricken with", "afflicted by", "patient", "disease" or "sick" suggest constant pain and a sense of hopelessness. While this may be the case for some individuals, a disability is a condition that does not necessarily cause pain or require medical attention.

- 6** Avoid the use of words such as "burden", "incompetent", "defective", "special", etc. which suggest that persons with disabilities should be treated differently or be excluded from activities generally available in the community.

- 7** Be particularly careful with terminology used in headlines. Remember that headlines make the first impression.
- 8** Refer to technical aids in factual, non-emotional terms. Avoid prolonged focus on support equipment.
- 9** Persons with disabilities are comfortable with the terminology used to describe daily living activities. Persons who use wheelchairs go for “walks”, people with visual impairments “see” what you mean, etc. A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner; however, that does not mean the words used to describe the activity must be different.
- 10** Remember that although some disabilities are not visible, it does not mean they are less real. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as epilepsy, haemophilia, mental health, learning, or developmental disabilities also encounter negative attitudes and barriers.



# MEDIA COVERAGE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

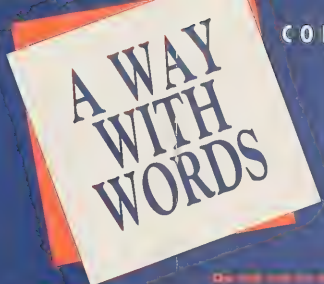
## Researching, Writing and Reporting

- 1 Too often, when a person with a disability is featured in a story that has several possible angles, the human interest story line dominates, e.g., how the individual has overcome great odds.
- 2 There are few examples of in-depth coverage of issues of particular importance to persons with disabilities (e.g., lack of physical access to facilities, employment, poverty, etc.).
- 3 Persons with disabilities are seldom asked for their views on stories dealing with transportation, the environment, child care, etc.

The media can help create and reinforce positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities. Progress has been made in recent years and media professionals are asking advice on how to report on, discuss, and write about disability.

# TERMINOLOGY GUIDE

# CONCERNING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



Do not use (ne pas utiliser)

Aged (The)  
•elderly (the)

Birth defect  
•congenital defect  
•deformity

Blind (The)  
•visually impaired (the)

Confined to a wheelchair  
•wheelchair-bound

Cripple  
•crippled  
•lame

Deaf (The)

Hard of hearing (The)  
•hearing impaired (the)

Do use or say

**SENIORS**  
Adjectives like frail, senile or feeble suggest a negative image of seniors and should not be used.

**PERSON WITH A DISABILITY SINCE BIRTH, PERSON WHO HAS A CONGENITAL DISABILITY**

**PERSON WHO IS BLIND, PERSON WITH A VISUAL IMPAIRMENT**

**PERSON WHO USES A WHEELCHAIR, WHEELCHAIR USER**  
For individuals with a mobility impairment, a wheelchair is a means to get around independently.

**PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WITH A MOBILITY IMPAIRMENT, PERSON WHO HAS ARTHRITIS, A SPINAL CORD INJURY, ETC.**

**PERSON WHO IS DEAF**  
When referring to the entire deaf population and their culture it is acceptable to use "the deaf".

**PERSON WHO IS HARD OF HEARING**  
These individuals are not deaf and may compensate for a hearing loss with an amplification device or system.

Do not use (ne pas utiliser)

Epileptic (The)

Fit  
•attack / spell

Handicapped (The)

Do use or say

**PERSON WHO HAS EPILEPSY**  
**SEIZURE**

**PERSON WITH A DISABILITY UNLESS REFERRING TO AN ENVIRONMENTAL OR ATTITUDINAL BARRIER**  
In such instances "person who is handicapped by" is appropriate.

Do not use (ne pas utiliser)

Insane  
•lunatic  
•manic  
•menial patient  
•mentally diseased  
•neurotic  
•psycho  
•psychotic  
•schizophrenic  
•unsound mind

Invalid

Do use or say

**PERSONS WITH A MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITY, PERSON WHO HAS SCHIZOPHRENIA, PERSON WHO HAS DEPRESSION**  
It is important to remember that the development of appropriate terminology is still in progress; however, the above terms are currently in use. The term "insane" (unsound mind) should only be used in strictly legal sense. Obviously, words such as "crazy", "demented", "deviant", "loony", "mad" and "nuts" should be avoided.

**PERSON WITH A DISABILITY**  
The literal sense of the word "invalid" is "not valid"

Do not use (ne pas utiliser)

Mentally retarded  
•defective  
•feeble minded  
•idiot  
•imbecile  
•maroon  
•retarded  
•simple  
•mongoloid

Normal

Patient

Physically challenged  
•differently able

Spastic

Suffers from  
•afflicted by  
•stricken with

Victim of cerebral palsy,  
multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc.

Do use or say

**PERSON WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, PERSON WHO IS INTELLECTUALLY IMPAIRED**  
One can say, a person with Down's syndrome, only if relevant to the story.

**PERSON WHO IS NOT DISABLED**  
Normal is only acceptable in reference to statistics, e.g., "the norm".

**PERSON WITH A DISABILITY**  
Unless the relationship being referred to is between a doctor and client.

**PERSON WITH A DISABILITY**

**PERSON WHO HAS SPASMS**  
Spastic should never be used as a noun.

**PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WHO HAS CEREBRAL PALSY, ETC.**  
Having a disability is not synonymous with suffering.

**PERSON WHO HAS CEREBRAL PALSY, MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS, ARTHRITIS, ETC., PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, PERSON WITH A MOBILITY IMPAIRMENT**





## Bridging the Communications Gap

Here are some suggestions to improve communications with persons with disabilities.

- 1** When talking with a person with a disability speak directly to him/her rather than through a companion who may be there.
- 2** Avoid putting persons with disabilities on a pedestal and using patronizing terms. Interview a person with a disability as you would any other person.
- 3** Do not unnecessarily emphasize differences. Having a “one of them” versus a “one of us” attitude only serves to reinforce barriers.
- 4** In visual treatments (e.g., television, photographs), do not dwell on technical aids or adaptive devices unless, of course, the purpose is to introduce or discuss a particular aid or device.

Following an interview, ask yourself:

- 1** Am I writing this piece because it involves a person with a disability or because the issue and related circumstances are relevant to the general population? If it did not involve a person with a disability, would I still want to write it?

- 2 Is a reference to a disability necessary to the story? If it is, am I using the correct terminology (e.g., “uses a wheelchair”, and not “confined to a wheelchair”)?
- 3 Is this piece accurate and unbiased? Have I avoided sensationalism?

## CONCLUSION

Journalists can contribute to a more positive and accurate image of persons with disabilities. The information provided to the general public, and the ways in which this information is presented, often create a framework for the attitudes people have and the ways in which they interact with individuals with disabilities. If the coverage of disability-related issues is done in a non-emotional, factual and integrative manner, the public will no doubt begin to question the prejudices and stereotypes that still exist.

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**W***ords with Dignity.* Ontario March of Dimes.

**W***orthless or Wonderful: The Social Stereotyping of Persons with Disabilities.* Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat, Department of the Secretary of State of Canada.



# ORGANIZATIONS CONSULTED

**C**anadian Association for Community Living  
(CACL)

4700 Keele Street, Kinsmen Building

Toronto, Ontario

M3J 1P3

(416) 661-9611

**C**anadian Association of the Deaf (CAD)

2435 Holly Lane, Suite 205

Ottawa, Ontario

K1V 7P2

(613) 526-4785

**C**anadian Council of the Blind (CCB)

396 Cooper Street

Ottawa, Ontario

K2P 2H7

(613) 567-0311

**C**anadian Hard of Hearing Association  
(CHHA)

2435 Holly Lane, Suite 205

Ottawa, Ontario

K1V 7P2

VOICE (613) 526-1584,

TDD (613) 526-2692

**C**anadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)  
2160 Yonge Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
M4S 2Z3  
(416) 484-7750

**C**anadian National Institute for the Blind  
(CNIB)  
1931 Bayview Avenue  
Toronto, Ontario  
M4G 4C8  
(416) 486-2500

**C**anadian Paraplegic Association (CPA)  
520 Sutherland Drive  
Toronto, Ontario  
M4G 3V9  
(416) 391-0203

**C**oalition of Provincial Organizations  
of the Handicapped (COPOH)  
624-294 Portage Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3C 0B9  
(204) 947-0303

**L**earning Disabilities Association  
of Canada (LDAC)  
323 Chapel Street  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1N 7Z2  
(613) 238-5721



**N**ational People First  
4700 Keele Street, Kinsmen Building  
Toronto, Ontario  
M3J 1P3  
(416) 661-9611

**C**anadian Deaf and Hard of  
Hearing Forum (CDHFF)  
2435 Holly Lane, Suite 205  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1V 7P2  
VOICE (613) 526-4867,  
TDD (613) 526-2492

**N**ational Educational Association  
of Disabled Students (NEADS)  
4th Level Unicentre  
Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1S 5B6  
(613) 233-5963

**O**ne Voice Seniors Network  
350 Sparks Street, Suite 901  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1R 7S8  
(613) 238-7624



**T**he Society for Depression and Manic-  
Depression of Manitoba  
4-1000 Notre-Dame Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3F 0N3  
(204) 786-0987

**C**anadian Friends of Schizophrenics  
95 Barber Greene Road, Suite 309  
Don Mills, Ontario  
M3C 3F9  
(416) 445-8204















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